THAT WE MAY LIVE IN PERFECT UNITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Author Annie Dillard grew up in a Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, sitting in the balcony with her communicants class friends looking down at the congregation, made up of Pittsburgh's industrial and professional elite, and wondered at the whole enterprise. Not long ago she became a Roman Catholic. She knows what's in the

Bible. She knows a lot of history and she knows, from experience, about the church, and this is what she wrote once about the whole business.

> “What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already, flawed to the core, full of wild ideas and hurried self-importance. Who can believe in the Christians . . .?” (*Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament,* p. 36/37)

Dillard is right. It is not a pretty picture from the start. The earliest Christian tradition of all is argument, contention, divisiveness. It's why Paul wrote letters. In Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Christians argued about doctrine, the conduct of sacraments, leadership.

Paul tries scolding the Corinthians, tells them there is a better way to be Christian, in fact, a better way to be human. It's the way of love. But the older Paul becomes, the wiser and more mature, the more he ponders the unfathomable mystery of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the bigger and broader his vision of the church becomes.

Near the end of his life, in a Roman jail cell, he writes to the church in Ephesus. Now his emphasis is the unity of the church, the reconciliation between its Jewish and Gentile members. Get this: the unity of that church would demonstrate to the world the truth of what God had done in Jesus Christ and continues to do in the world through the work of the Holy Spirit.

> “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4: 1-3)

Is there a more passionate—or relevant—plea in scripture?

Paul's thought had lately taken wing. Now he believes that in Jesus Christ God has started a new creation, a new humanity. In Christ, God—with a plan before the ages—intends to heal divisions, break down walls of hostility, unite all things. Paul soars as he sits in that miserable jail cell. "He is our peace," he says about Jesus. God's purpose is to bring together the human race, tribes, nations, slaves, free women, men.

And the church is supposed to show the world what God's new creation looks like.

Markus Barth, in his classic commentary on Ephesians, says, about that wonderful admonition, “Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit,” “ . . . it is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort is meant, involving will, sentiment, reason, physical strength. Do it now! You are to do it. I mean it!” (*Ephesians,* Markus Barth, Vol. II,p.428)

Barth translated the critical phrase: “Take pains to maintain the unity of the Spirit.” It is painful, is it not? It is painful to maintain unity with people you know are wrong and obnoxious on top of it. It is—I propose—a lot

more difficult to maintain the unity than to walk away, to destroy it.

I was ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament in 1963, 38 years ago. During that time I witnessed and participated in church struggles and arguments about race, about the church's role in the civil rights movement, about poverty, about war and peace, about economic justice, about the United Nations, about gender and inclusive language, about sex education, reproductive rights and abortion. The first time I attended a General Assembly, 1970—Chicago—a radical group of young and some not-so-young peopled called The Submarine Church, invaded the General Assembly, walking down the aisles—smoking pot—brandishing and

squirting water machine guns and occupied the platform.

Some commissioners thought the protest was prophetically appropriate, others were appalled and wanted the Moderator to call the police (the place was Chicago and the Chicago police had shown the world how it dealt with civil disobedience four summers earlier). The Moderator, a Saint by the name of Bill Laws—did the entirely unexpected. He was a big man—he put his arm around the shoulder of the long-haired leader, with a plastic machine gun in his hand—and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ welcomed him to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church(U.S.A.) and invited him to have a private conversation and then to return to address the Assembly.

I’ve seen a lot of Presbyterian arguing and fighting—but never in my nearly 40 years of ministry have I heard schism—dividing the church—seriously proposed as a way to resolve our disagreements.

A few years ago when I was serving as Moderator of the 208th General Assembly, a newspaper reporter called me on the eve of the Assembly, tried everything he could think of to get me to say I thought the differences in our church were so deep that division was the only way out. I would not—and will not—say that. Finally, in exasperation, he said, “Look, I’ve talked to both sides. I know what they’re saying about each other.

You've already two churches—so why don't you just call a meeting, hire a good lawyer, get a divorce, split the property and move on?"

Historian Lukas Visher makes the observation: "Reformed churches constantly succomb to the temptation to solve their internal tensions and disagreements by splitting up." (*Reformed World,* April 1997, p.33)

And one of my favorite poems by one of my favorite poets, the late Phyllis McGinley, is "How to Start a War." "Said Zwingli to Muntzer . . ." [Zwingli and Muntzer were two 16th century leaders of the Protestant Reformation

who disagreed vigorously on the mode of baptism sprinkling—Zwingli, or total immersion—Muntzer.]

“Said Zwingler to Muntzer
I’ll have to be blunt, sir,
I don’t like your version
Of Total Immersion.

And since God’s on my side
And I’m on the dry side,
You’d better swing ovah
To me and Jehovah.
Cried Muntzer, ‘It’s schism,
Is infant Baptism!
Since I’ve had a sign, sir,

That God’s will is mine, sir,

Let all men agree

With Jehovah and me,

Or go to Hell, singly,’

Said Muntzer to Zwingli,

As each drew his sword,

On the side of the Lord.”

(Phyllis McGinley, *Times Three, Selected Verse,*

New York, The Viking Press, 1960, p28)

A year ago a Presbyterian leader and spokesperson for a major political party in our church said it bluntly—“You talk about our aversion to blood on the floor—to fighting—I submit to you that a bloody battle is exactly what we need to be engaged in—we need to fight until the battle

is won." (Parker Williams, Cited by Bohl in *A Moment to Decide*)

So, how important is this? Does it all really matter? Does it matter whether or not Christians get along and hold their churches together? There are moments when I find myself wanting to say "no, this does not matter. It does not matter to my people, or the city of Chicago, or the United States of America." The unity of the Presbyterian church doesn't matter. Maybe it doesn't even matter to God. God is too busy with wars and starvation and AIDS epidemics and peace processes. God is too occupied with justice for oppressed people, and comfort for the sick and courage for the depressed,

hope for the dying, to care much about whether there is one Presbyterian denomination or twenty or none.

And I can convince myself if it weren't for a part of the Bible that I find increasingly and persistently disturbing.

I refer, of course, to our text this morning, from the 17th chapter of the Gospel according to John, and a particularly incisive sentence the writer says Jesus said, "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me."

The 'they' are the disciples, the tiny community created by Jesus and his ministry. And it's a prayer, actually. They are at the table of the last supper and Jesus has a lot on his mind. Jesus is preparing them for his absence, preparing them to carry on his work and mission.

At the heart of it is love—the love God has for the world, the love God has for them, the love God is. "Abide in it—live in it—this love of God," he tells them. And love one another because the best way to tell the world about God's love is to show what it looks like in the quality of your life together.

Now, near the end, just before they get up and leave the room and walk to a garden where he will be betrayed and arrested—that is, the last thing he ever says in their presence before his death—is this prayer. He prays for them. He prays for their protection and safety. He prays that they will not abandon the world with all its ambiguity and riskiness. He prays that their joy will be full.

And, of all things, he prays for their unity “that they may be one . . . that the world may believe . . . that the world will see in their oneness the love of God.”

Wouldn’t he be surprised—no not surprised—wouldn’t he be sad at the monumental way his would-be followers have chosen, over and over again in their history, to ignore one of the clearest things he ever said about their task and mission and very identity? That they may be one—that the world may believe.

We’re not talking about a “feel good,” superficial, “the more we get together and share our stories the happier we’ll all be” unity.

The unity which Jesus mandates is not an end in itself—it is for a greater end—“that the world will know.” (See Beverly Gaventa, in *Texts for Preaching*)

How important is it? Han Küng, one of the most important and creative thinkers of our time, was writing recently about inter-faith dialogue and the role religious conflict plays in political, social, ethnic conflict. If there is any hope for reconciliation and peace, Küng argues, it begins locally, modestly, right here—in Christian parishes and in the hearts of individual Christians. “The most fanatical, the cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired and legitimized by religion . . . .There will be no peace among world

religions without peace among the Christian Churches." (*Christianity and World Religions,* p.442-443)

So wouldn't it be something if instead of internal conflict, the churches showed the world what respect and tolerance and compassion looked like?

Wouldn't it be something if instead of launching rhetorical broadsides against ideological foes, we found a way to show the world what the love of Christ looks like?

Wouldn't it be something if, instead of eyeing one another warily, and condemning one another's positions on abortion and sexuality and Christology and

consigning to eternal damnation everyone who doesn’t agree—decided that the most urgent evangelical imperative in our mutual strategic plans was to show the world something the world has rarely seen—namely the love of God expressed in love for one another?

His promise—which we have never tried—is that the world would find that compelling; the world might believe what we say if we showed what it looks like in our love.

So that is the challenge before us—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—each of our congregations.

I was in a meeting recently with two representatives of the Vatican Council on the promotion of Christian unity —12 of us from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

We had talked all day about Christian unity—how strenuous the struggle for it is—and how desperately we need it—how desperately the world we are called to serve needs it. At the end of the day, our Moderator, Syngman Rhee, stood up to speak. Syngman's father was executed 50 years ago by the North Korean army because he was a Christian. The 20th century was the most divisive and brutally violent century in human history, Syngman said. And he himself, standing there in front of us, was a symbol of the tragically violent divisiveness. By God's grace, the 21st century could be a time to reunite what has been divided, to restore what has been separated, to reconcile and forgive and heal and make whole again.

It was no accident that he saved it for the end, and no accident that he said it while they were still sitting at a dinner table. Even when we have not been as good at loving one another as he commanded, even while failing to show the world what his love looks like among us, we have somehow known here, at that same table, the importance of our unity, the reality of our unity, which transcends our petty differences and disagreements.

Somehow here, at this table, we know our oneness with those who have gone before us and those who will come after us, neighbors near and far, and even, thanks be to God, people with whom we disagree and don’t much like.

And here we know in ways none of us could begin to explain—God's love for us, all of us; love which surrounds us, enfolds us, holds us up—love from which nothing separates us.

"This is my body, broken for you," he said at that table. "This is my blood, shed for you—drink—all of you from this cup," he said.

And, praying for them and for us, "I ask that they all may be one, so that the world may believe." Amen.